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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 004108

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA AND DS/IP AND DS/ITA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [CASC](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: ZIA CUTS SHORT CHINA TRIP TO RETURN TO RATTLED BANGLADESH

REF: A. DHAKA 4089

[B](#). STATE 152460

Classified By: A/DCM D.C. McCullough, reasons para 1.4 b, d.

[1](#)1. (S) SUMMARY: PM Zia is returning early to Bangladesh to cope with the aftermath of the 503 blasts that injured 191 and killed two. The BNP and the AL have blamed each other for the blasts, and the Awami League-led opposition has called protests for August 19 and a nationwide general strike for August 20. Bangladeshis are rattled but life is almost back to normal. According to NSI, there is "no doubt" that JMB members "with external training" (read India) conducted the blasts. We have urged the BDG and the Awami League to exercise restraint. END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (SBU) According to police and media reports, 503 blasts rattled 63 of Bangladesh's 64 districts, injuring 191 and killing two. As many as 18 unexploded devices were recovered, including one in the 64th district, and as many as 85 persons have been arrested.

[1](#)3. (SBU) On August 18, local media reported that two suspects made confessions in Satkhira district court, with one saying that he had received his bombs from Moniruzzaman, a member of the Ahle Hadith movement. Moniruzzaman was reportedly arrested and has also confessed.

Political Reaction

[1](#)4. (SBU) PM Zia issued a statement from China, where she was on a five-day official visit, that condemned the blasts as heinous "acts of terrorism," extended her condolences to the victims, and described the attackers as "enemies" of Bangladesh bent on creating panic. She urged Bangladeshis to remain calm.

[1](#)5. (SBU) At an early evening rally in downtown Dhaka, BNP SYG and Local Government Minister Mannan Bhuyian promised that the blast perpetrators would be identified in four days. "We must be cautious of the forces who want to come to power by any means and who don't believe in the politics of development and democracy," he said, in an apparent allusion to the Awami League (AL). Zia intimate Health Minister Khondaker Hussain added in the same vein: "Those who try to tarnish the country's image have committed this heinous crime. They want to want to create political issues as they don't have a genuine issue against the government." Law Minister Moudud Ahmed said: "This is nothing but an immature political game."

[1](#)6. (SBU) At a separate rally, Jamaat Islami put the blame more squarely on the AL. Social Welfare Minister Ali Mujahid said the opposition conducted the blasts out of jealousy that Bangladesh is advancing economically, while JI Senior Assistant Secretary M. Kamaaruzzaman said that those who had failed to gain public support for their 14-point reform proposals planned the blasts to destroy Bangladesh's democracy.

[1](#)7. (SBU) AL President Sheikh Hasina, meanwhile, alleged that the BNP, PM son Tarek Rahman, and BDG security services orchestrated the blasts because they realize they will lose the next election. Only the BDG, she said, had the capacity to organize blasts on a national scale. AL SYG Abdul Jalil added: "Fundamentalist forces with direct patronization of the BNP-Jamaat led ruling coalition committed the crimes to destroy the country's democratic process and movement by the secular forces."

Zia Returning to Bangladesh

[1](#)8. (C) After being told earlier in the day by NSI DG General Haider and other senior BDG officials that PM Zia would stick to her five-day schedule in China, PMO Political Secretary Haris Chowdhury told us late August 18 that Zia has decided to return to Dhaka on August 19. Chowdhury said that the BDG is "confused" about the blasts since Jamaat ul Mujahidin (JMB), the banned group which signed leaflets found at the blast scenes, is too small to conduct such a campaign on a national scale. He asserted the BDG would make every effort

to bring the attackers to justice, remarking that it is clear who benefits from the current situation (i.e., the Awami League and/or India).

Protests

19. (SBU) The AL called demonstrations for August 19 and a countrywide general strike (hartal) on August 20 to protest BDG responsibility for the blasts. The Islamist umbrella group IOJ, a BNP coalition partner, has also announced a rally for August 19. Post's standard hartal policy of confining USG personnel to the diplomatic enclave will be in effect.

Business Concerns

110. (SBU) The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association expressed concern that the attacks would hurt business since foreign buyers were already voicing safety concerns about Bangladesh. One major garment exporter (pro-AL) told us August 18 that several of his foreign buyers have canceled trips to Dhaka. The Dhaka Stock Exchange fell sharply after the blasts but recovered most of the lost ground by the end of the day.

Urging Restraint/Offering Assistance

111. (S) On August 18, Charge telephoned NSI DG General Haider to offer condolences and repeat the USG offer of assistance to blast investigators (ref b). Regarding the latter, Haider undertook to discuss it with relevant ministries and get back to us. Asked if PM Zia were considering an early return from China, he said that the BDG has "everything under control" and that she would stick to her original schedule. Haider confirmed that explosive devices were local manufactured with identical components, and that two suspects have confessed in court. JMB members with "external training" are responsible "beyond a doubt" for the blasts, he said.

112. (C) Charge made the same points in separate telephone conversations with Foreign Secretary Hemayetuddin, just before he departed for a SAARC meeting in Islamabad, PMO Parliamentary Affairs Advisor S.Q. Chowdhury, and Home Minister of State Babar. Chowdhury objected to Indian High Commissioner Veena Sikri's reported statement attributing the blasts to Islamic fundamentalists, which he maintained was unhelpful. He took the point on the need for rhetorical restraint, but urged Charge to ask her diplomatic colleagues to do the same.

113. (C) In response to Charge's appeal for restraint, Saber Hussain Chowdhury, Hasina's political secretary, asserted that at the BNP rally yesterday BDG ministers said that Sheikh Hasina should be arrested and interrogated. He complained that the BDG, as it did after the August 21 attack on the AL leadership, has set a negative tone that will again undermine any investigation. AL members, he continued, have been attacked throughout the country for their alleged role in the blasts. Under these circumstances, he said, how can the AL trust the BDG or the intelligence services to bring the attackers to justice?

Comment

114. (C) The reflexive slanging match between the BNP and the AL is disappointing but familiar. However, unlike August 21, the BDG this time is clearly concerned about the political and security implications of the nationwide blasts, and we should have a sense soon whether it is pursuing this investigation with genuine vigor, or whether it will again meander without achieving, or wanting, concrete results. The AL, for its part, will try to exploit the blasts and the BDG's handling of this major embarrassment to finally build some political traction against the BNP. Despite doubts about JMB's capabilities, it is emerging as the group poised to take the blame for the blasts. It also appears that at least some members of the loosely connected Ahlthe Hadith (Dr. Galib)-Bangla Bhai-JMB combine will be tried and convicted for the blasts.

CHAMMAS